Abstract: Animals are treated in philosophy dominantly as opposed to humans, without revealing their independent semiotic richness. This is a direct consequence of the common way of defining the uniqueness of humans. We analyze the concept of ‘semiotic animal’, proposed by John Deely as a definition of human specificity, according to which humans are semiotic (capable of understanding signs as signs), unlike other species, who are semiosic (capable of sign use). We compare and contrast this distinction to the more standard ways of drawing the distinction between humans and animals.

Keywords: John Deely, semiotic animal, philosophy of biology, biosemiotics, conditio humana

[The first thing that postmodernity accomplishes is to restore to the human animal its animality, together with the realization that all thought, all perception, is in signs.]
—John Deely (2009: 216)

Introduction

Much like the numerous other concepts, properties, and defining traits that have been proposed to draw the distinction between humans and animals, the concept of semiotic species attempts the same in properly semiotic terms. While such an attempt may be dubious to begin with (cf. Rattasepp 2014 for a general critique), John Deely’s particular conception moves away from the standard ways of drawing the distinction and toward more interesting conclusions, which are more suitable for the biosemiotic perspective.

In addition to elaborating the semiotic specificity of human beings, the concept of semiotic species shows a way toward a more precise and better...
founded understanding of the semiosic nature of nonhuman animal life, and as such lays the foundation for an improved philosophical discourse on the semiotic, albeit non-semiotic aspects of epistemology and ontology of nonhuman life. For while the more traditional ways of defining human uniqueness portray “man” as separate and divided from nonhuman life by postulating a binary opposition between humans and animals, the semiotic definition is, or at least should be, non-hierarchical and multi-dimensional. Moreover, such a distinction eschews the folk-definition of “animal” as opposed to the “human”, and instead allows for an analysis of the myriad forms of sign use in all of life’s diverse forms. As one of us has put it, “What philosophy lacks is not discussion of animals, but rather discussions of animals where they would appear as living representatives of nonhuman modes of being, of alterity, of a life that is not human” (Rattasepp 2016). It is this that the biosemiotic understanding of nonhuman life would help to rectify.

In the pages that follow, we will take as the object of study and the target of some brief remarks John Deely’s book *Semiotic Animal* (2010), in order to examine his particular answer to the age-old question of “what is man?”, and how does “he” relate to other living beings. In the course of these few pages we will come to the conclusion that Deely, ever the reluctant philosopher but a great celebrant of semiotics, begins from what appears to be a very typical, historically commonplace and philosophically untenable position, but ends up providing unique insights that are all his own. But before commencing on a brief analysis of Deely’s text, we will first provide some remarks on the concept of semiotic animal itself, and then proceed to a brief description of what the role and function of animals has been in philosophy proper, and why it should be considered problematic.

Traditionally, philosophy has lacked, with few notable exceptions and up until the recent surge of animal studies and related fields in the past few decades, any kind of sophisticated treatment of animals from a philosophical perspective. This is not to say that philosophers do not talk about animals. It is to say that they commonly lack any interest in animals as creatures worth knowing in their own right, as nonhuman modes of being and subjects that represent umwelten that differ from that of humans. Animals can be symbols, exemplars, metaphors, ciphers, zoomorphic classifiers, the entire purpose of which is nevertheless to reveal something about humans: Jean Buridan, in his famous fable of the ass who dies of thirst and hunger for his lack of capacity for choosing, was not at all interested in actual donkeys.1

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1 For further discussion on the absence of animals in philosophical thought, see Rattasepp 2014.
As a result, for the philosophical discussion of the *conditio humana*, animals are systematically represented as those creatures who are collectively lacking some human characteristic. The goal for such an analysis then is to find a singular dividing line that would place all animals in their totality to one side of the line, and all humans as completely unique and exceptional on the other, resulting in a binary opposition in which both sides are defined in direct opposition to the other. In the *Semiotic Animal*, Deely remarks on this, as when he describes critically the traditional conception of humans as rational animals, according to which they are in possession of a “feature that set it above the rest of animal nature, and apart from material nature as a whole” (Deely 2010: 103, emphasis in the original). Despite this declaration, below we will see whether Deely, in this particular book, fares well on the philosophical, or on the biosemiotic side.

**On the Concept of Semiotic Animal**

It is interesting to note that the concept “semiotic animal”—as *semiotisches Thier*—was first used already in 1897 by a founder of mathematical topology, Felix Hausdorff:

> Der Mensch ist ein semiotisches Thier; seine Menschheit besteht darin, daß er statt des natürlichen Ausdrucks seiner Bedürfnisse und Befriedigungen sich eine conventionelle, symbolische, nur mittelbar verständliche Zeichensprache angeneignet hat. (Mongré 1897: 7–8)

> [Man is a semiotic animal; his humanity lies in the fact that, instead of naturally expressing his needs and wants, he has developed a language of signs which is conventional, symbolic, and only indirectly understandable.]

This was well known, for instance, to Max Bense (Bense 1992), who was interested in mathematical aspects of semiotics.

Yet as often happens, the one and the same concept can be coined independently numerous times, for concepts too, much like words in everyday language, are often polyphyletic. Rossi-Landi (1978) made use of the concept (a wholly semiotic animal), as quite frequently did Petrilli and Ponzio (2010). For John Deely, however, the interest in the question of what constitutes the human in relation to other animals goes back to his pre-semiotic works. In his paper “Animal Intelligence and Concept-formation” (Deely 1971), written

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2 See Plessner 1976. Of course, as a prerequisite for understanding the *conditio humana*, one should understand the *conditio vitae*.

3 Paul Magré was F. Hausdorff’s pseudonym which he used for his philosophical works.

4 An additional distinction has been drawn by Petrilli and Ponzio (2010: 158): “if each human being is a semiotic animal, a … semiotician is a *metasemiotical animal*.”
under the influence of a book by Mortimer Adler (Adler 1967), who was his
mentor at the time, Deely already remarked:

That distinction depends on seeing that there are things and aspects of reality
independent of one’s ambit of interest and activity, just what the brute
animal in principle cannot and in fact does not see. (Deely 2009 [1971]: 127)

For both Adler and Deely, this is “a defense of humans as different in kind
(rather than in degree) from animals” (Cobley 2009: 7), a strict formulation
which he would later relax and elaborate, while not entirely abandoning it.
Notably, Deely (1971) also already by that time refers to the works of Jakob
von Uexküll (Deely 2009 [1971]: 127). Another of Deely’s papers on this
Rauch and Carr, deals with the same question from a different aspect, namely
on the relations of linguistics (which deals with the human sign system) and
semiotics (which covers semiosis of all kinds) (Deely 1980).

In his Basics of Semiotics, the expression ‘semiotic animal’ appears twice
(Deely 1990: 1, 124) but is not, as yet, thought of as a concept proper (it
is not included in the index). At the time Deely was unaware of the earlier
usages of this expression (see Pelkey 2016: 447–448), although the basic
insight that he would later develop more fully is already present, as when he
discusses “the reflective experience of linguistic animals” (Deely 1990: 13),
and narrative, which is argued to be absent in nonhuman animals (Deely
1990: 2–3). In a further indication toward his later thinking, Deely writes
with a reference to Jacques Maritain: “Animals make use of signs without
knowing that there are signs” (Deely 1990: 36). This claim would remain
the cornerstone of his conception of the human-animal difference, although
in a much more developed form, as we see in its further elaboration in his
magnum opus, the Four Ages of Understanding. In the very last paragraph of
the book (right before the Resumé), in a subchapter titled “The Semeiotic
Animal” (Deely 2001: 736–737), he writes:

[T]he human animal, as the only animal that, besides making and making
use of signs, knows that there are signs, is properly called animal semeioti-
cum, the semiotic animal. Even as Descartes’ definition of the human as a res
cogitans served to mark the transition from ancient and medieval thought
(inasmuch as the Greeks and Latins alike concerned in defining the human
being as the “rational animal”, animal rationale) to rationalistic an empiricist
modern thought, so this definition will serve to mark for future generations
the transition from modern to postmodern thought. (Deely 2001: 736)

Soon after, the concept of semiotic animal becomes the theme of a longer
treatise. In the John Deely Reader, the bibliography of Deely’s works (Cobley
2009: 410–411) lists three versions of the paper “The Semiotic Animal” as
the first systematic draft (Deely 2003), the humanist version (Deely 2003a), and the definitional version (Deely 2005b). In 2005, Deely published it as a paper (Deely 2005; 2005b) and also as a longer treatise on the topic (Deely 2005a), plus his chapters in a book together with Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio (Deely, Petrilli, and Ponzio 2005). In 2010, he published the earlier text (of Deely 2005a) expanded into a book (Deely 2010).

The core of Deely’s conception is as follows (Deely 2003a: 10):

Of all living things we can say that they are semiosic creatures, creatures which grow and develop through the manipulation of sign-vehicles and the involvement in sign-processes, semiosis. What distinguishes the human being among the animals is quite simple … . Every animal of necessity makes use of signs, yet signs themselves consist in relations, and every relation (real or unreal as such) is invisible to sense and can be understood in its difference from related objects or things but never perceived as such. What distinguishes the human being from the other animals is that only human animals come to realize that there are signs distinct from and superordinate to every particular thing that serves to constitute an individual in its distinctness from its surroundings.

Such an animal, capable of coming to know that there are signs as well as of using signs to hunt and fish and find its way through the surroundings, is generically semiosic but specifically semiotic, the only animal capable of knowing that there are signs to be studied as well as made use of to more “practical” ends.

This difference in awareness about signness has numerous implications—in particular, it gives rise to both ethicality and true violence, and thereby leading to the understanding of semioethics appropriate for the sign-aware semiotic animal (Petrilli and Ponzio 2010). The concept grows (Deely 2013).

We will now turn to a brief analysis of what we can conclude from Deely’s discussion, which almost entirely deals with humans as the semiotic species, to that often neglected but necessary mirror counterpart, the nonhuman animals: in attempting to define human specificity, what becomes of nonhumans in Deely’s treatment of man?

Dealing with Animals in Philosophy: Some Aspects in John Deely’s Approach

There are several characteristic ways that animals are commonly discussed in philosophical literature, and they constitute a set of interlinked lines of thinking, the unfortunate consequence of which is the expulsion of animals from philosophy and the reassurance of human uniqueness at the face of the
rest of nature. We will now briefly summarize some of these dimensions of discourse, and see how Deely fares with respect to them.

First, in asking the question of human uniqueness, in asking “what distinguishes humans from animals”, the emphasis is placed squarely on the “human” side of the question, and not on the “animal” side. Ethological knowledge of nonhuman animals seldom enters philosophical discussions on the nature of the human animal (one notable exception: Merleau-Ponty 2003). Taking the example of language, Lippitt notes that in a sense such a search for the properly human is tautological: “only human beings are capable of speech, which, in turn, founds the human subject. Animals enter that tautology as a phantasmatic counterpoint to human language” (Lippitt 2000: 15). This is Deely’s starting point as well, for despite being called a study on the semiotic animal, the very few references to actual nonhuman animals all merely note briefly a simplistic behaviour of an animal before immediately moving on to the analysis of human capacities (e.g., “cat stalking its prey”, Deely 2010: 59, “howl of the wolf” ibid., 62).

Second, the way in which the distinction between different species of nonhuman animals is drawn is markedly different from the way in which the distinction is drawn between animals and humans. Animals differ, humans are unique. While one nonhuman species is distinct from another on the basis of its particular species-specific traits, humans, to the contrary, are described as sharing a base animal nature with the rest of the living world, but with a certain addition on top, such as reason, language, consciousness, etc. As Tim Ingold puts it,

We like to picture ourselves as animals plus. … According to this view of humans as animals plus, we are constitutionally divided creatures, split between the physical condition of animality and the moral condition of humanity. … In short, the human being is represented not as a specific manifestation of animality, but as the manifestation of a specific human essence superimposed upon a generalised animal substrate. (Ingold 1990: 210)

It is here that we see Deely moving away from philosophy proper, and into a more biosemiotically sensible position. Indeed, Deely’s repeated insistence that semiotic capacities are always only species-specific rather than transcendent (indeed, the book’s index contains references to 28 separate instances of various forms of species-specific in its scant 125 pages of text), lends a certain modesty to Deely’s position, conceiving as it does that that which is “uniquely human” is in fact just a narrow capacity to make use of one particular means

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6 For an extended discussion of this, and for one semiotic possibility for the return of animals to theoretical thought, see Rattasepp 2016.
of meaning-making. As such, it eschews the possibility of hierarchization entailed in the “animal plus” conception, according to which only humans have somehow transcended the animal base and are therefore set above and beyond all other animals.

Third, the purported property that marks human uniqueness is invariably mental (e.g., language, cognition, reason), or becomes relevant by its relation to some supposed mental capacity. Such is the case of tool-making, which gains its importance from allowing for the reshaping of matter based on human mental conceptions. Non-mental, merely biological traits are of no interest for philosophy. At first blush, Deely’s conception of the semiotic animal seems to follow along the same lines, for his entire discussion seems to be cast in the light of meaning-making, of the understanding and comprehension of the things in the world. A closer look reveals, however, that this is mistaken, as for example when he remarks that “the study of the action of signs finds precisely a path beyond the representative contents of consciousness” and that signs are “rooted in the being of triadic relations which transcend the divisions between nature and culture, inner and outer” (Deely 2010: 97). More broadly, it is the contention of biosemiotics, to which Deely would himself most likely subscribe, that semiosis appears whenever habits or codes are formed in a manner that is irreducible to their material basis. As such, biosemiosis cannot in any way be reduced to any supposedly mental capacity (Kull et al. 2009).

Fourth, nonhuman animals are discussed in the singular, rather than as a plenitude of species covering all of life’s endless diversity. For most philosophers, uninterested as they are in actual living forms, the concept “animal” in the singular usually suffices. The function of this singular locution “animal” is to form a background from which human uniqueness is supposed to stand out. As Marchesini puts it, such a conception “creates a horizon of the non-human that is characterized by universality, which is considered to be neither a multiplicity nor a bearer of individual characteristics, as opposed to the category of humanity which is intrinsically pluralistic” (Marchesini 2010: 93). It is difficult to judge how this point relates to Deely’s thought. On the one hand, *Semiotic Animal* includes very few references to actual nonhuman animals, and even less to their behaviour beyond common-sense stereotypes, as already noted above. Yet his insistence on the limited, species-specific nature of human semiotics as opposed to the semiosis of all life—the distinction which, for Deely, ultimately marks human uniqueness—would at least make any further analysis based on his conception of the nature of semiosis amenable to a detailed, typological, non-hierarchical approach to studying nonhuman semiosis. This is discussed further below.
At this juncture we have, however, come to a point of contention, the solution to which is yet to be found, and will not be attempted to provide here. The issue lies in the fact that while Deely, starting from a general critique of the classical debate between rationalists and idealists, tries to find a semiotic third way out of the impasse, nevertheless remains, to a considerable extent, stuck within the framework established by the earlier debate. For traditionally, humans as rational, reasoning beings are portrayed as engaged in inner contemplation of the external world, yet it is a world which is there merely as a set of things that serve as fodder for thought. In this view, the semiosic activity of the one who apprehends the external things provides the entirety of the interpretation. As such, the cognitive activity, the meaning making, is entirely on the side of the one who interprets, and no attention is paid to the distinct forms that the external world can take and thereby provide different kinds of feedback. Most importantly for the present discussion, there is the classic distinction in semiotics between the living and the nonliving, the moving and the immobile, the beings endowed with their own semiosic capabilities, and the things without. Throughout the book, Deely presents his semiotic theory of the human condition as a set of relations linking the interpreter to objects, things, the physical world, etc. (e.g., Deely 2010: 56, 60–62). The unsolved issue here is that, since semiosis is arguably coextensive with life, whether the engagement with and description of the living, as opposed to the nonliving, is a cognitively different phenomenon, since what is alive is apprehended in a different manner from the non-living as a result of the semiosic capacities of the other living being. As it stands, in Deely’s analysis of semiosic relations, everything in the world is represented, much like in traditional philosophical discourse, as objects of apprehension, with the semiosic capacities of nonhuman animals, for example, needing no separate, distinct description.

Finally, some remarks on the importance and usefulness of Deely’s conception of the semiotic animal for philosophically oriented biosemiotics. This is the upshot of what we can conclude from Deely’s discussion of the age-old question of conditio humana. Semiosis permeates all life, and is arguably coextensive with life. The various living beings are capable of making use of various different types of sign, based on their physiology, sensory and cognitive capacities: “Of all living things we can say that they are semiosic creatures, creatures which grow and develop through the manipulation of sign-vehicles and the involvement in sign-processes, semiosis” (Deely 2010: 99). And these capacities for meaning-making are at first often merely potentialities, and are realized and function only in specific, contextual situations.
Furthermore, no living being is capable of using just one single type of sign. This calls for a typology of signs, which would be non-hierarchical, and for a description of the meaning-making capacities of various organisms that is multi-dimensional and context-bound. The capacity for the use of symbols does not extinguish the capacity for the use of indices, nor is a creature who is capable of making distinctions and of drawing indexical relations from that distinction more part of “nature” than the symbol user. Peirce’s nine-fold typology is a classic example of such a conception of sign types, which, however, may need fine-tuning in more biosemiotics terms. There are, of course, numerous others (cf., e.g., Maran 2009 on the semiotization of John Maynard Smith), and moreover, the differences in the capacity for the use of different signs are not limited to the level of the species, but also appear on the level of individuals, groups, groups in different ecological contexts, and in different moments in time (Hendlin 2016).

And then and at last, within this myriad life-forms with their numerous semiosic capabilities, there may indeed be found one species that can be characterized by the capacity to use one particular, perhaps indeed one unique way of understanding; that of semiotics as Deely describes it, that is, “only human animals come to realize that there are signs”, that the human being is “the only animal capable of knowing that there are signs to be studied as well as made use of to more “practical” ends” (Deely 2010: 100–101, emphasis in the original). We are left, then, with the conclusion that is best summarized by Deely himself, and worth quoting in full:

“Semiotic animal” ... underlies the continuity whereby, in semiosis, all lifeforms, including humans, “live and move and have their being”. What distinguishes the semiotic animal is the awareness of what ties its being in with the whole of nature, what makes it a part of the unfolding cosmic whole. (Deely 2010: 103, emphasis in the original)

**Conditio humana as a Semiotic Problem**

How is it possible to be aware of signs? Although this question has not been directly analysed by Deely, we can be rest assured that he would agree that this is a relevant semiotic problem. Let us, then, briefly outline the major types of approaches (types of solutions) to this problem.

(1) One can assume that all differences in semiotic capabilities are, in the end, just differences in degree. This would be the standard nominalist position according to which typologies are a matter of convention, and as such they

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7 For some thoughts on non-hierarchical “flat ontology” for general semiotic theory, cf. Rattasepp 2013
would not describe the ways in which semiotic systems themselves build their own boundaries. Or alternatively, that the systems we are describing all have certain intermediate forms of semiosis which would not allow us to delineate any straightforward distinctions as actually present in the semiotic systems themselves.

(2) One can assume that there exist different mechanisms which are responsible for qualitative differences between semiotic systems—differences in kind.

(2.1) The major differences between semiotic systems are described as semiotic thresholds, which can be settled unidimensionally. Any fuzzy boundaries are described as threshold zones.

(2.1.1) The boundary between human and non-human semiosis represents the lower semiotic threshold—between semiosis and non-semiosis.

(2.1.2) The boundary between human and non-human semiosis is not the lowest but an intermediate semiotic threshold.

(2.1.2.1) Such a boundary lies between true signs and meanings without categorized signs (cf. Sonesson 2010).

(2.1.2.2) It would be a boundary between sign types: e.g., symbols vs other (pre-symbolic) types of sign. A distinctive feature of humans would then be our ability to use a particular, specific type of sign of which nonhuman animals would not be capable of using (e.g., animal symbolicum by Cassirer 1944; symbolic species, Deacon 1997).

(2.1.2.3) Alternatively one could argue, as for instance Bickerton (1990) does, that the difference is primarily not in sign types, but in a new relationship between signs which then enables the appearance of a complex syntax. This has been the major position of biolinguistics, such as developed by Noam Chomsky and his colleagues.

(2.1.2.4) The boundary is described neither on the basis of sign types nor sign relations, but on the basis of a different type of interpretation, such as, in particular, as a difference between interpretation and metaintepretation (as in Deely’s own distinction between the semiosic and the semiotic).

(2.1.2.5) The positions (2.1.2.2, 2.1.2.3, and 2.1.2.4) were synthesized by Thomas A. Sebeok in a specific manner. The kernel of his view is the claim that one can observe the appearance of new types of sign that together make proper syntax possible, including those responsible for syntax as such, and thus of human language, which would then allow for a new level of interpretation. In other words, the specificity of the human mind is related to sign types, and the signs that appear as novel in human language are syntactic
signs. These are the signs that do not refer to anything other than a type of relationship between different signs. For example, words such as ‘and’, or ‘or’, cannot be found in the lexicon of non-human animals. It is these signs that make narration and metadescription possible.

(2.2) The major differences between semiotic systems form a set of thresholds that are settled polydimensionally. Fuzzy boundaries are described as threshold zones. All species partake in a multitude of sign types simultaneously and/or contextually. In this case no unique lower–higher axis can exist. In addition, a relation of negation is not sufficient to describe the difference. This may include a combination of various types of boundaries as described by (2.1.2). To emphasise this plurality, the term ‘semiotic species’ (instead of ‘semiotic animal’) may be used.

This last type of approach (2.2) is the one that can serve as a basis for a richer analysis of animals in philosophy.

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8 Belonging to a species can be based on recognition instead of negation or opposition. Cf. the biosemiotic concept of species (Kull 2016).
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