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The Semiotic Animal and the Image of God

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Abstract: Semiotician and philosopher John Deely made the observation that human beings are the *semiotic animal*, the only species with the capacity to become aware of signs and semiosis, i.e. semiotic consciousness. He discusses in multiple places that this is the defining characteristic of human beings from all of the other animals. Since human beings ascend to semiotic consciousness, they thus are able to engage in the social construction of reality, and they are the only animals that do this. Deely's concept of the semiotic animal is ripe for dialogue with theological anthropology. In this article, I explore how humanity's being the semiotic animal is part and parcel of its being made in the Image of God. By being the semiotic animal, humans are able to exercise dominion over the rest of creation and participate in the continuing creation of God.

John Deely rightly noted that human beings are the *semiotic animal*.¹ By *semiotic animal*, he does not mean that human beings are the animal that participate in semiosis. The term *semiosis* was coined by Charles Sanders Peirce to refer to the triadic dynamic relations involved in signification.² Peirce all provides the definition for *sign* with which I am operating in this article: A *sign*

¹ John Deely, *Semiotic Animal: A Postmodern Definition of "Human Being" Transcending Patriarchy and Feminism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), 39–52.

² "(It is important to understand what I mean by *semiosis*. All dynamical action, or action of brute force, physical or psychical, either takes place between two subjects [whether they react equally upon each other, or one is agent and the other patient, entirely or partially] or at any rate is a resultant of such actions between pairs. But by "semiosis" I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign [-vehicle], its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs. . . . and my definition confers on anything that so acts the title of a 'sign.')" Charles Sanders Peirce, "A Survey of Pragmaticism," *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols., ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (vols. 1-6) and Arthur W. Burks (vols. 7-8) (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960), 4.484. *All references to Peirce will take the following format: CP, volume number.section number.*

or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen.³

All animals, as demonstrated by semioticians such as Charles Morris and Thomas Sebeok, higher and lower alike, participate in semiosis.⁴ However, human beings are unique in that they have the capacity to become conscious *that* they participate in semiosis, and that they have the ability, through creating new relations in semiosis, to bring new things into existence, namely socially constructed reality.⁵ This capacity for a semiotic consciousness is what sets human beings apart from the other animals; it is what makes them the semiotic animal.

According to the first book of Moses, God created humanity according to his own image and in likeness to himself. I have already addressed some of the implications that semiotics, namely the semiotics of Charles Peirce, has for understanding the nature of the Image of God.⁶ Properly speaking, all images, including the *imago Dei*, are signs; they represent something to someone in some respect or capacity. However, I have thought on this more, and I have discovered more implications of what semiotics has for understanding the Image. More specifically, in light of Deely's work, I have reflected more on implications of what it means to be the semiotic animal and thus have concluded that being created as the semiotic animal goes hand in hand with being created according to God's Image. To be created according to the Image of God is to be the semiotic animal.

What evidence do I have for this? Once God had decided, in Genesis 1, to make human beings according to his image, he commanded them to be fruitful, multiply, and *have dominion* over the earth. As I discussed in my previous article, this command to have dominion over the earth goes hand in

³ CP, 2.228. I will summarize and elaborate some more on this below.

⁴ Charles W. Morris, *Signs, Language and Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1946); Thomas A. Sebeok, *Perspectives in Zoosemiotics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972).

⁵ John Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, Semiotics, Communication and Cognition (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 110–20.

⁶ Andrew Hollingsworth, "Charles Sanders Peirce, Semiotics, and the *Imago Dei*," *Churchman* (forthcoming 2021).

hand with being created according to the Image.⁷ To be according to the Image of God is to have dominion over, to lord over, the creation in such a way that it represents the Creator.⁸ Images are icons, and icons are sign-vehicles that represent their objects based on some relation of similarity. Thus, to accord to the Image of God means to represent God to the rest of creation, and to do so by having dominion over it in such a way that it signifies him. Connected with this *having dominion* is God's command to the man to name the other creatures (Gen 2). *The task or job of naming is a semiotic job.* To give an object a name is to designate it with a sign-vehicle, a representamen, that will represent that object to others. By designating this object with a linguistic representamen, what Peirce would have referred to as a *symbol*,⁹ the man has *created* something new, namely a new semiotic relationship. When the man gives an animal a name, which is a sign-vehicle, he encodes that name with another sign that mediates the name to the animal as object as well as to interpreters.¹⁰ This other sign is none other than Peirce's *interpretant*. Numerous different aspects and other signs are encoded into the interpretant concerning the animal, such as value. Is it good for food? Is it a threat to my existence? Is it neutral, neither positive nor negative, to me? All of this and more is encoded into the signifying relationship that the name has with its object.¹¹

By encoding meanings and values into the names for the animals, the man participates in the creative work of God. How is this? First, by giving something a name, the man has introduced a new relationship into the world, namely a semiotic one. It is through signs that meanings, definitions, and values are ascribed to things by humans, and by encoding these semiotic relations, the man makes these relations shareable.¹² Anyone else can learn these signs and share in the new semiosis. Every time a new sign arises so does a new relation, which is a new creation. *Sign designation is the basis for all socially constructed reality.* By being able to come up with names and create new sign-

⁷ This is also argued for by John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Volume 1—Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 110–12.

⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 136–40.

⁹ CP 2.292–302.

¹⁰ I borrow this language of *codes* from Umberto Eco. See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, *Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), esp. 48–142. Though I adopt Eco's language of codes here, I am by no means endorsing his general theory signs, which ultimately is antithetical to that of Deely and Peirce. I simply find this language helpful for describing the way cultural conventions and rules dictate sign relations.

¹¹ Concepts such as these come from Deely, who adopts them from Jakob von Uexküll's work on *Umwelt* and appropriates them for his semiotic project. See John Deely, *Basics of Semiotics*, *Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 119–24.

¹² Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, 113–15.

vehicles, human beings are able to create new signs, which, as Deely has properly demonstrated, exist categorically as relations, both *ens reale* and *ens rationis*.¹³ Technically speaking a *sign* is not a thing but a signifying relationship. “Sign” designates the triadic relations that exist between a sign-vehicle, an object, and an interpretant. In this sense, “sign” and “semiosis” are very similar in definition, though still distinct. Whereas “sign” designates these relations as a noun, “semiosis” insists on the dynamic active nature of these relations, namely how they are at work in the being of the others.

The development of language is a semiotic process. All names, as well as the other parts of speech, came from somewhere and were encoded. As mentioned briefly above, languages represent what Peirce referred to as *symbols*. A *symbol* is a sign modality in which the sign-vehicle relates to its object based on some rule, law, or convention. In other words, symbols are always conventional signs as they rely on some form of conventional code as the basis for their signifying relations to their objects. He, along with Deely, further demonstrate that symbols always rely on some other semiotic relation, be it iconic or indexical, to serve as the terminus for their own signifying relations.¹⁴ A symbol’s relation to its object thus is never purely arbitrary, contra Saussure and all others affirming a dyadic model of the sign and semiosis.¹⁵ My point here is that the relation that language, i.e. symbols, has to its object is never purely arbitrary. Symbolic relations terminate and are encoded as a result of iconic and indexical relations. So, language, though not without a conventional coding, does relate to the world of objects, as well as the world of things.¹⁶

But what does all of this have to do with being co-creators with God? What does this have to do with being made according to God’s Image? By being able to create and encode new signs, humans thus create new relations,

¹³ Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, 123–42.

¹⁴ CP, 2.295.

¹⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1986), 67–69. Eco is perhaps the most significant contemporary semiotician who would accept a dyadic model of the sign as well as some theory of arbitration, though he insists that the cultural coding involved in correlating an expression plane (Saussure’s *signifier*) and a content plane (Saussure’s *signified*) does not lead to ontological or philosophical relativism. See Eco, *Theory of Semiotics*, 48–54, and 66–72.

¹⁶ This distinction between *objects* and *things* comes from Deely. A *thing* is some existent as it is apart from any cognizing or perceiving mind, i.e. *ens reale*. An *object* is a thing as it is cognized, perceived, and valued, i.e. *objectified* via semiosis. *Objects* actually becomes signs of *things* to perceiving creatures. The semiotic animal then creates a new sign, such as a name, and then uses that sign to designate and refer to the object. Humans to have epistemic access to reality, i.e. the world of things, but they only so through semiosis, which mediates things back to humans as objects. Unperceived things are not objects. See Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, 17–37.

and by creating new relations they create new objects and new things. Think, for example, about the boundaries that separate one country from another. Boundaries are signs, i.e. they signify where this country ends and this other country begins, or vice versa. However, boundaries are symbols in that they were created and encoded by humans to perform their semiotic tasks. These boundaries are created by humans and do not exist prior to this. These boundaries are real, and they exist as part of socially constructed reality.¹⁷ Though it may not be something one can reach out and touch with their hands or taste with their tongue, socially constructed reality is just as real as physical reality; it is not a figment of someone's imagination. If someone were to get a running go and sprint across this socially constructed symbol without following the properly socially constructed and socially encoded procedures for crossing said boundary, they *really* will be pursued by law-enforcement officers and potentially arrested. Just because some object may exist as a socially constructed reality does not make it any less real than if it were a natural object. By being able to recognize that they participate in semiosis and thus able to create new signs, human beings are able to continue God's creation in the form of socially constructed reality. By naming the animals, the man has contributed to God's creation; he has contributed to reality.

We should be able to ascertain at this point that to name something is to have dominion over it. Speech act theory can prove helpful here. According to J. L. Austin, in order for performative speech acts to be "happy," certain states of affairs must obtain, one of those being that the speaking agent must be in an appropriate place, namely that place of authority, to perform said performative speech act.¹⁸ A *performative speech act* is a speech act wherein a speaking agent performs some action through the medium of speaking.¹⁹ Naming is one such example of a performative speech act. When a couple brings new life via childbirth into the world they have brought about a new reality, namely this wonderful and beautiful new child. By naming, said child, they have brought about *another* reality, namely a reality wherein this child is represented by the name *x*. By naming this child, the speaking agents have *effected* a new state of affairs. Speech acts, as one should infer here, are semiotic acts. This includes performatives. Performative speech acts are semiotic actions that bring new realities into existence, and naming is one such creative semiotic act. By engaging in these performative-semiotic acts, humans exercise dominion over the creation and participate in the continuing of God's creation, as his Image.

¹⁷ Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*,

¹⁸ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 53.

¹⁹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 6–7.

Human beings, by being the semiotic animal, are the Image of God and represent him as they participate in semiosis.

There is another way, however, that being the semiotic animal correlates with being made according to God's Image. *Semiosis is always a triadic process, and signs always subsist in triadic relations.* Both signs and semiosis are sorts of parallels to the Triune God. Signs subsist as a representamen (sign-vehicle), an object, and an interpretant. All three of these are needed for a sign to be a sign, and if even one of them is missing then there is no sign, or signification for that matter. A *representamen*, or sign-vehicle, is that which represents some object to someone in some respect or capacity. Some semioticians understand the representamen as a sign-proper. *Objects*, as defined by Peirce, serve as the ground for semiosis. They are that which a representamen signifies, or better yet, *represents* (hence *representamen*). Objects, as Umberto Eco pointed out, give rise to the need to signify and speak.²⁰ One might say that they *generate* representamen. Whenever someone happens upon some object they cognize and understand said object through some sign-vehicle. As I look at my laptop here on my desk, this object is represented to my mind through the sign-vehicle "laptop." The sign-vehicle represents the object to my cognizing mind. However, a second sign is also at work mediating the sign-vehicle to the object, this being the *interpretant*. In this example, an interpretant would be like a sort of definition, or mediating content, that connects the sign-vehicle "laptop" to the laptop object on my desk. Interpretants proceed from both representamen and objects.

There are obvious parallels here between signs and the Trinity.²¹ First, the Father eternally generates the Son, not in the sense of creation but in the sense of begetting. Also, the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Second, the Father serves as the ground of the Godhead, and the Son *represents*, or makes known, the Father. The Spirit *mediates* the Son to the Father, forming an eternal triune bond between them all. All three persons are fully God and none of them are identical with the others. The same is the case for signs. The representamen, the object, and the interpretant are all fully sign yet none of them is identical with the other. One should note that this is not functionalism. It is not that a sign has these three distinct functions, but that all three of these

²⁰ Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, trans. Alastair McEwen (San Diego: Harcourt, 1999), 14.

²¹ Peirce himself once said, "In many respects this trinity agrees with the Christian trinity; indeed I am not aware that there are any points of disagreement. . . . I will not, however, carry this speculation any further, as it may be offensive to the prejudices of some who are present." C. S. Peirce, *The Charles S. Peirce Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Photographic Service, 1966), MS 359.

are distinct from one another yet are all one. As I stated above, should any of these three be absent then there is no sign.²²

What about semiosis? In what way does semiosis parallel the Trinity? One should recall that, whereas “signs” designates these triadic signifying relations as nouns, “semiosis” concerns the actual triadic-dynamic signifying relations as actions. Semiosis, I believe, parallels what certain Patristic theologians have called *perichoresis*. Each the representamen, object, and interpretant are involved and present in the being of the others via their dynamical signifying relations. Objects and interpretants are always at work in the signifying task of representamen; objects and representamen are always at work in the mediating task of interpretants; and representamen and interpretants are always at work in identifying and communicating the object.

Signs and semiosis are the very medium that make experience possible. There is no cognizing act that does not occur through semiosis and the medium of signs. Thus, all human experience reflects the Triune nature of God. Not only for humans, but all experience is mediated to all forms of life through signs and semiosis. What makes humans unique is that they are capable of semiotic consciousness. In other words, they are capable of becoming aware that there are signs, and they are capable of creating new signs. As humans make new signs, they make new semiotic relations and thus are able to participate in the social construction of reality and participate in God’s continuing acts of creation. Thus, in both experience and semiotic consciousness, human beings *represent* aspects of who God is, i.e. they serve as signs to the Triune One. As mentioned above, images are signs, namely icons, and icons represent their objects in some capacity of similarity, be it physical or mental. Human beings, the semiotic animal, serve as icons of the divine by representing him to the rest of creation via their experience of reality and through having dominion over the creation via semiosis, which also enables them to be partakers in God’s continuing creation. Thus, the semiotic animal is the Image of God.

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²² For a more thorough discussion on Peirce’s semiotics and the Trinity, see Andrew Robinson, *God and the World of Signs: Trinity, Evolution, and the Metaphysical Semiotics of C. S. Peirce*, Philosophical Studies in Science and Religion (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 61–111.